

THE EXPLANATION

Q: Do you believe that this machine could be helpful in changing the government?

A: Changing the government...

Q: Making it more responsive to the needs of the people?

A: I don't know what it is. What does it do?

Q: Well, look at it.



A: It offers no clues.

Q: It has a certain... reticence.

A: I don't know what it does.

Q: A lack of confidence in the machine?

Q: Is the novel dead?

A: Oh yes. Very much so.

Q: What replaces it?

A: I should think that it is replaced by what existed before it was invented.

Q: The same thing?

A: The same sort of thing.

Q: Is the bicycle dead?

Q: You don't trust the machine?

A: Why should I trust it?

Q: (States his own lack of interest in machines)

Q: What a beautiful sweater.

A: Thank you. I don't want to worry about machines.

Q: What do you worry about?

A: I was standing on the corner waiting for the light to change when I noticed, across the street among the people there waiting for the light to change, an extraordinarily handsome girl who was looking at me. Our eyes met, I looked away, then I looked again, she was looking away, the light changed. I moved into the street as

did she. First I looked at her again to see if she was still looking at me, she wasn't but I was aware that she was aware of me. I decided to smile. I smiled but in a curious way—the smile was supposed to convey that I was interested in her but also that I was aware that the situation was funny. But I bungled it. I smirked. I dislike even the word "smirk." There was, you know, the moment when we passed each other. I had resolved to look at her directly in that moment. I tried but she was looking a bit to the left of me, she was looking fourteen inches to the left of my eyes.

Q: This is the sort of thing that—

A: I want to go back and do it again.

Q: Now that you've studied it for a bit, can you explain how it works?

A: Of course. (Explanation)

Q: Is she still removing her blouse?

A: Yes, still.

Q: Do you want to have your picture taken with me?

A: I don't like to have my picture taken.

Q: Do you believe that, at some point in the future, one will be able to achieve sexual satisfaction, "complete" sexual satisfaction, for instance by taking a pill?

A: I doubt that it's impossible.

Q: You don't like the idea.

A: No. I think that under those conditions, we would know less than we do now.

Q: Know less about each other.

A: Of course.

Q: It has beauties.

A: The machine.

Q: Yes. We construct these machines not because we confidently expect them to do what they are designed to do—change the government in this instance—but because we intuit a machine, out there, glowing like a shopping center...

A: You have to contend with a history of success.

Q: Which has gotten us nowhere.

A: (Extends consolation)

Q: What did you do then?

A: I walked on a tree. For twenty steps.

Q: What sort of tree?

A: A dead tree. I can't tell one from another. It may have been an oak. I was reading a book.

Q: What was the book?

A: I don't know. I can't tell one from another. They're not like films. With films you can remember, at a minimum, who the actors were...

Q: What was she doing?

A: Removing her blouse. Eating an apple.

Q: The tree must have been quite large.

A: The tree must have been quite large.

Q: Where was this?

A: Near the sea. I had rope-soled shoes.

Q: I have a number of error messages I'd like to introduce here and I'd like you to study them carefully... they're numbered. I'll go over them with you: undefined variable... improper sequence of operators... improper use of hierarchy... missing operator... mixed mode, that one's particularly grave... argument of a function is fixed-point... improper character in constant... improper fixed-point constant... improper floating-point constant... invalid character transmitted in sub-program statement, that's a bitch... no END statement.

A: I like them very much.

Q: There are hundreds of others, hundreds and hundreds.

A: You seem emotionless.

Q: That's not true.

A: To what do your emotions... adhere, if I can put it that way?

Q: (Long explanation)

Q: Do you see what she is doing?

A: Removing her blouse.

Q: How does she look?

A: ... Self-absorbed.

Q: Are you bored with the question-and-answer form?

A: I am bored with it but I realize that it permits many valuable omissions: what kind of day it is, what I'm wearing, what I'm thinking. That's a very considerable advantage, I would say.

Q: I believe in it.

Q: She sang and we listened to her.

A: I was speaking to a tourist.

Q: Their chair is here.

A: I knocked at the door; it was shut.

Q: The soldiers marched toward the castle.

A: I had a watch.

Q: He has struck me.

A: I have struck him.

Q: Their chair is here.

A: We shall not cross the river.

Q: The boats are filled with water.

A: His father will strike him.

Q: Filling his pockets with fruit.

Q: THE face... the machine has a face. This panel here...

A: That one?

Q: Just as the human face developed... from fish... it's traceable, from, say, the... The first mouth was that of a jellyfish. I can't remember the name, the Latin name... But a mouth, there's more to it than just a mouth, a mouth alone is not a face. It went on up through the sharks...

A: Up through the sharks...

Q: ... to the snakes...

A: Yes.

Q: The face has *three* main functions, detection of desirable energy sources, direction of the locomotor machinery toward its goal, and capture...

A: Yes.

Q: Capture and preliminary preparation of food. Is this too...

A: Not a bit.

Q: The face, a face, also serves as a lure in mate acquisition. The broad, forwardly directed nose—

A: I don't see that on the panel.

Q: Look at it.



A: I don't—

Q: There is an analogy, believe it or not. The... we use industrial designers to do the front panels, the controls. Designers, artists. To make the machines attractive to potential buyers. Pure cosmetics. They told us that knife switches were masculine. Men

felt... So we used a lot of knife switches...



A: What's this one used for?

Q: It's part of the process. We had a lot of trouble with that one, the—

A: I know that a great deal has been written about all this but when I come across such articles, in the magazines or in a newspaper, I don't read them. I'm not interested.

Q: What are your interests?

A: I'm a director of the Schumann Festival.

Q: What is she doing now?

A: Taking off her jeans.

Q: Has she removed her blouse?

A: No, she's still wearing her blouse.

Q: A yellow blouse?

A: Blue.

Q: Well, what is she doing now?

A: Removing her jeans.

Q: What is she wearing underneath?

A: Pants. Panties.

Q: But she's still wearing her blouse?

A: Yes.

Q: Has she removed her panties?

A: Yes.

Q: Still wearing the blouse?

A: Yes. She's walking along a log.

Q: In her blouse. Is she reading a book?

A: No. She has sunglasses.

Q: She's wearing sunglasses?

A: Holding them in her hand.

Q: How does she look?

A: Quite beautiful.

Q: You don't trust the machine?

A: Why should I trust it?

Q: What is the content of Maoism?

A: The content of Maoism is purity.

Q: Is purity quantifiable?

A: Purity has never been quantifiable.

Q: What is the incidence of purity worldwide?

A: Purity occurs in .004 per cent of all cases.

Q: What is purity in the pure state often consonant with?

A: Purity in the pure state is often consonant with madness.

Q: This is not to denigrate madness.

A: This is not to denigrate madness. Madness in the pure state offers an alternative to the reign of right reason.

Q: What is the content of right reason?

A: The content of right reason is rhetoric.

Q: And the content of rhetoric?

A: The content of rhetoric is purity.

Q: Is purity quantifiable?

A: Purity is not quantifiable. It is inflatable.

Q: How is our rhetoric preserved against attacks by other rhetorics?

A: Our rhetoric is preserved by our elected representatives. In the fat of their heads.

Q: There's no point in arguing that the machine is wholly successful, but it has its qualities. I don't like to use anthropomorphic language in talking about these machines, but there is one quality...

A: What is it?

Q: It's brave.

A: There's not much bravery in art now.

Q: Since the death of the bicycle.

Q: THERE are ten rules for operating the machine. The first rule is turn it on.

A: Turn it on.

Q: The second rule is convert the terms. The third rule is rotate the inputs. The fourth rule is you have made a serious mistake.

A: What do I do?

Q: You send the appropriate error message.

A: I will never remember these rules.

Q: I'll repeat them a hundred times.

A: I was happier before.

Q: You imagined it.

THE POWERHOUSE

Close to my place is the powerhouse.
I knew there wouldn't be anybody in it.
It's beautiful
like a church. It works
all by itself. And with almost no sound.

All glass. And a tall square tower on it.
Colored lights shine from within. They
color the glass. Pink. Pale green.
Not stained. Not that kind.
And not fragile. Just light. Light weight.

A red rod erect from the tower
blinking on top red. Behind it gray
wings of motion. A fan of light
opening and folding somewhere in the west of town.
Periodic as a metronome.

The crickets were talking like electricity.
A white spitz barked at me
though my sneakers made no noise.
I walked up the slight slope—it's wide—
to the powerhouse

went past the doorway
big as a barn door squared. Big horse I thought.
The stars were far away. Small dim points.
I saw through the doorway gray metal coils.
All the clean machinery and engines.

I don't know what to call it all.
I don't know the names.
Painted pretty colors slick and clean.

I knew there wouldn't be anybody there.
Nobody needs to work there I thought.

And walked past that door farther on.
White lights icy and clean.
Not blazing. Cool. Gossamer. The pink and green
like-sherbet-colors bathing the gray machines.
Came to a place where vapor

cooled my skin. A breeze made by waterspray
up high. And there was white steam unfurling
evaporating against the dark.
Down lower a red transparent ball
on a pedestal. Incandescent. Big

—a balloon mystery. Inside
through another doorway I saw a hook
painted yellow. Huge and high enough
to lift a freight car. I stood looking in
—my shadow so long

and black from the streaming lights.
And I was wrong. Somebody moved
in the powerhouse. Came from between the coils
and giant tubes. Down off the balcony
on the steel stairway

smooth and slow. Like floating.
Like not having to look or think.
I thought he'd be a Negro but he wasn't.
He didn't see me. Didn't need to see anything.
He had a red face and a blue uniform.

—MAY SWENSON

A: The issues are not real.
Q: The issues are not real in the
sense that they are touchable. The
issues raised here are equivalents. Reasons
and conclusions exist although
they exist elsewhere, not here. Reasons
and conclusions are in the air
and simple to observe even for those
who do not have the leisure to consult
or learn to read the publications of
the specialized disciplines.

A: The situation bristles with difficulties.

Q: The situation bristles with difficulties but in the end young people and
workers will live on the same plane as
old people and government officials,
for the mutual good of all categories.
The phenomenon of masses, in following
the law of high numbers, makes
possible exceptional and rare events,
which—

A: I called her then and told
her that I had dreamed about her,
that she was naked in the dream,
that we were making love. She didn't
wish to be dreamed about, she said—
not now, not later, not ever, when
would I stop. I suggested that it
was something over which I had no
control. She said that it had all been
a long time ago and that she was
married to William now, as I knew,

and that she didn't want... interruptions
of this kind. Think of William,
she said.

Q: He has struck me.

A: I have struck him.

Q: We have seen them.

A: I was looking at the window.

Q: Their chair is here.

A: She sang and we listened to
her.

Q: Soldiers marching toward the
castle.

A: I spoke to a tourist.

Q: I knocked at the door.

A: We shall not cross the river.

Q: The river has filled the boats
with water.

A: I think that I have seen her with
my uncle.

Q: Getting into their motorcar, I
heard them.

A: He will strike her if he has lost
it.

A (concluding): There's no doubt
in my mind that the ballplayers today
are the greatest ever. They're brilliant
athletes, extremely well coordinated,
tremendous in every department. The
ballplayers today are so magnificent

that scoring is a relatively simple thing
for them.

Q: Thank you for confiding in me.

Q: ... show you a picture of my
daughter.



A: Very nice.

Q: I can give you a few references
for further reading.

A: (Weeps)

Q: What is she doing now?

A: There is a bruise on her thigh.
The right.

—DONALD BARTHELME